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# GEORGE M. SWENEY

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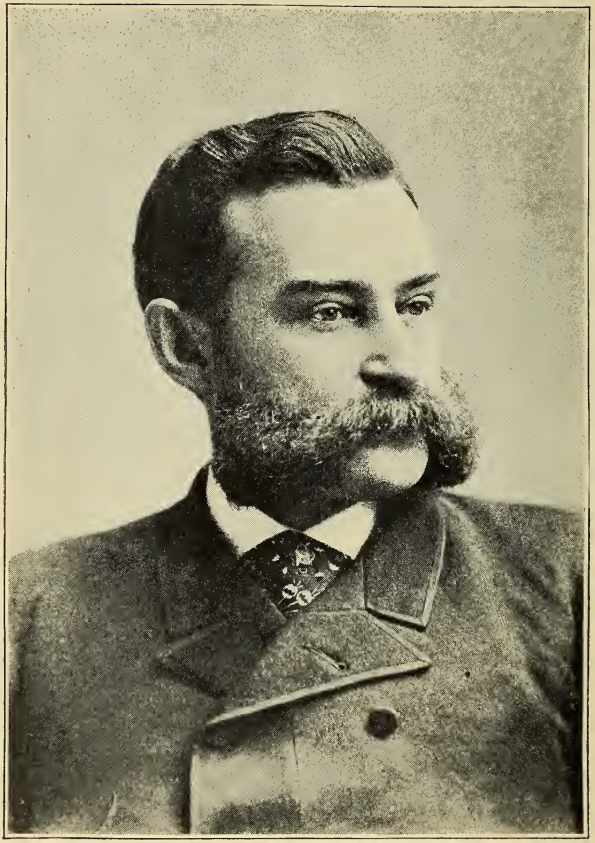

# Memorial Sermon

IN MEMORY OF

# Mr. GEORGE M. SWENEY

BY

REV. W. E. PARSON, D. D.

PASTOR
CHURCH OF THE REFORMATION

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*Washington, D. C., November 24, 1901*

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Gift.
J. M. Russell.
9 N '00

I hear a sweet voice ringing clear,
All is well!
It is my Father's voice I hear,
All is well!
Where'er I walk that voice is heard,
It is my God, my Father's word,
Fear not, but trust: I am the Lord:
All is well!

—E. Paxton Hood.

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy.

—Wordsworth.

"At the still boyish age of eighteen he displayed one of the great qualities which characterized all his later life. He proved his love of country by enlistment as a private in the first year of the great war, and stood firmly by the colors."

—Hon. John A. Kasson.

*"Impressions of President McKinley," in The Century Magazine, December,* 1901.

# The Prayer.

Our Father, which art in Heaven! We come to Thee as children who need the things which are stored up in the treasure-house of Thy grace.

Thou art the fountain of life. To Thee the weak must come for strength, the sick for healing, the sinful for pardon, the blind for sight, the tempted for succor, the sorrowing for comfort, the dying for life.

We are weak, sinful, erring, tempted, dying mortals, and we come that our lack may be met in Thine infinite fulness.

We bless Thee, O Lord, that Thou hast made us in Thine own image, and hast endowed us with immortality, so that every instinct and desire of our souls impels us to reach out after Thee.

We never find rest till we find it in Thee.

We come to Thee, to-night, our Father, with thankful hearts that in the midst of the sorrows and burdens of life we can turn aside to the calm and sure retreat, which is found beneath the mercy-seat. Thou hast forgiveness. We hear the words of the Saviour—Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. We respond to His gracious invitation.

We rejoice that He declares—I am the resurrection and the life. Because I live ye shall live also. In my Father's house are many mansions.

Comfort us to-night, O God, with these precious words. As we are met in memory of a friend and comrade who fought his battles and has now finished his course, we ask Thy blessing on those whom Thou hast afflicted by this sore beveavement.

Give to her, who is left to mourn, the precious ointment of Thine own consoling peace. May the good hope of everlasting life uphold in strength all who are cast down, that bearing our own burdens we may also be able to bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. We pray for these Thy servants who in the day of battle were kept from the dangers of field and camp. Give them gratitude for Thy mercies in the past, and make each one a good soldier of Jesus Christ. Give us all to-night a lesson of good from the faithful life recently closed, in whose memory we meet. Lead our minds to the largest measure of consecration, through the remembrance of the life and sacrifice of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Hear us, O God, as we ask for these things for ourselves, and for all our fellowmen, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath taught us to pray—

Our Father, who art in heaven; Hallowed be Thy Name; Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven; Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us to our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; And lead us not into temptation; But deliver us from evil; For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. AMEN.

## The Hymns.

During the opening service the choir sang the following hymn (23d Psalm) to an arrangement by Schnecker:

"The King of Love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine forever.

Where streams of living water flow
My ransomed soul He leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow,
With food celestial feedeth.

Perverse and foolish, oft I strayed,
But yet in love He sought me,
And on His shoulder gently laid,
And home rejoicing brought me.

In death's dark vale I'll fear no ill
With thee, dear Lord, beside me,
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,
Thy cross before to guide me.

Thou spread'st a table in my sight,
Thy unctious grace bestoweth,
And, oh, the transport of delight
Which in my heart o'erfloweth.

And so through all the length of days
Thy goodness faileth never,
Good Shepherd! may I sing Thy praise
Within Thy house forever."

Immediately following the sermon the choir chanted the Lord's Prayer, after which Mrs. Parson sang the familiar words of Phoebe Carey to an arrangement of Ambrose, as follows:

"One sweetly solemn thought
Comes to me o'er and o'er:
I am nearer my home to-day
Than ever I've been before!

Nearer my Father's house,
Where the many mansions be,
Nearer the great white throne,
Nearer the crystal sea.

Nearer the bound of life
Where we lay our burdens down,
Nearer leaving the cross of grief,
Nearer gaining the crown.

But lying dark between,
And winding through the night,
Flows on the deep and unknown stream,
That leads me to the light.

Jesus, perfect my trust,
Strengthen my hand of faith,
And be Thou near me when I stand
Upon the shore of death."

## The Scripture Lesson.

He took a child, and set him in the midst of them; and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them:

Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me; and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me. And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbade him, because he followeth not us.

But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me.

FOR HE THAT IS NOT AGAINST US IS ON OUR PART.

FOR WHOSOEVER SHALL GIVE YOU A CUP OF WATER TO DRINK IN MY NAME, BECAUSE YE BELONG TO CHRIST, VERILY I SAY UNTO YOU, HE SHALL NOT LOSE HIS REWARD. Mark ix, 36–42.

# The Sermon.

TEXT.—*He that is not against us is on our part.*
*For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.*" MARK ix, 40-41.

These are the words of Jesus. There are no words in the whole range of Bible truth more fitting for this occasion. For myself, personally, I want to say that there is no more helpful sentiment in all our Christian faith than this broad, encouraging word uttered by the Saviour.

This evening has been set apart for a memorial service in honor of Mr. George M. Sweney. The occasion is peculiar, and the service somewhat unusual, from the fact that Mr. Sweney was not a member of this church, and was known to but a few of the congregation. He frequently sat here, worshiping with us, and in one sense I looked on him as a member of our congregation. There is, therefore, an eminent propriety in our holding this service here to-night in memory of him who had this church for an occasional resting-place in life's pilgrimage. He had no other church home, therefore do we gladly show the grace of Christian hospitality by opening our doors in his memory this evening.

For twenty years the pastor of this church knew

Mr. Sweney, and he counts it a blessed privilege to say some words to-night that will bring back for an hour the presence, the genial countenance, the hearty hand-grasp and the ringing voice, of as true a friend, as brave and loyal a soul, as any one of us has ever known.

Mr. Sweney was born in the town of Milton, Pa. Of his boyhood days there is but little known. He probably was the typical school-boy, busy with books, working out-of-doors, getting the hardening for the rugged work of life which fell to him long before he became a man. The poet Wordsworth, in "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," writes:

> "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison-house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy."

Life is the prison-house. School, work, and the serious things of life, come to shut off play, and make prisoners of us all.

While yet but a child Mr. Sweney's parents removed to what was then the far West, settling in the State of Illinois. Here he passed his early years. He was still a boy, only eighteen years old, when the civil war broke out.

The prison-house had not altogether closed him in, yet he was man enough to know that serious

business was before the country. He enlisted in the Eleventh Regiment, Volunteer Infantry, of Illinois. He was a Sergeant of his company, under Captain Fort, with Colonel Wallace commanding the regiment. The date of his enlistment was August 20, 1861. At once he met all the duties ordinarily laid upon a man. The prison-house closed entirely about the boy. With a man's duties, a man's responsibilities, a man's dangers, he wore his blue uniform, and seemed to the outward eye but one among the million men who went into the field in defense of the flag.

I wonder if this generation realizes the hazards and disabilities incurred by the men of the former time who responded to the call to arms when the life of the nation was at stake? Young men who had just entered on their studies, their trades, or professions, dropped everything to march in the mud, to famish in real prison-houses, to die unattended on the battle-field, or to walk halting all the rest of their days. Those who survived the dangers of field and camp never could regain the time lost, the places lost, and must also go halting through the remainder of life by reason of the prolonged interruption to their plans through bullets and bayonets.

Our friend Sweney was a man of exceeding modesty. Long and intimately as I had known

him I never heard him make any boast of his military record, though he had reason to be proud of it.

I went down to the Pension Office the other day to learn what was on record as to the war experiences of Mr. Sweney, and was much impressed by the contrast between a frigid document from the War Department, or the Surgeon General's Office, and the heroic, thrilling facts as they transpire on the field.

The official record simply states: The soldier, application number 37,365, enlisted Aug. 20, 1861; was sergeant of his company; wounded at Fort Donelson Feb. 15, 1862; discharged by reason of total disability at Chicago, 9th day of August, 1862. Gunshot wound between the knee and ankle of the left leg, shattering the larger bone of the leg."

The examining surgeon, five years after, says:

"The greater portion of the shaft of the bone for three inches is gone, leaving the fibula alone to sustain the weight of the body. The leg is greatly curved, and shortened from two to three inches. Is unable to walk without the support of a crutch or cane. The disability is permanent."

That is the whole record. It is brief and coldly exact.

In less than six months the boy has become a man. The boy who used to play with his tin soldiers only a little while ago is marching to mar-

tial music, lies down dreaming of his home, and rises to face death—for he is in the very thick of the fight when General Grant captures Fort Donelson.

It was at this time that Grant sent the "unconditional surrender" despatch to General Buckner, in command of the Confederate forces, adding—"I propose to move immediately upon your works."

Where was this boy when the cheers were going up that day over the surrender?

He had been lying all the night alone in the cold of a raw, snowy February. He was almost dead from loss of blood; from pain and cold. The shades of the prison-house have gathered thick.

The Colonel of the Eleventh Illinois, in a report of the part which his men took in this battle, says, that from the 11th to the 15th February the troops were almost constantly fighting their way over the heavily wooded hills, over ground which had not been reconnoitered, covered with a dense growth of underbrush, in the face of irregular fire from sharpshooters, varied by occasional discharges of artillery.

"The night of the 13th," the Colonel says, "was one of great suffering and hardship to the whole command. We lay within point-blank musket and rifle range of the enemy's breastworks, and at dark a storm of rain, soon turning to snow and accompanied by severe blasts, beat upon our unprotected

ranks. The spirits of the men never flagged, notwithstanding they were without tents or fires, exposed to the fierce storm, and assailed by the enemy's shot. The right of my line was more heavily engaged on the 15th than any other portion. The Eleventh Regiment, being posted on the right of my line, suffered more than any other regiment, having 67 killed on the field."

Read the history and you will see that Saturday, the 15th February, was the bloody day in the investment of Fort Donelson—up to that time the most deadly battle of the civil war.

General Grant made special mention of the bravery of officers and men in that campaign.

If he had known all the facts in the case I am inclined to think he would have mentioned one of his boy sergeants, and how he bore himself on that dark, cold night.

Some of the reports of the surrender had been written and sent to the commanding officer before that boy had been able to crawl out of the woods in search of shelter and a surgeon.

The wounded suffered intensely, and numbers of them froze to death as they lay on the icy ground.

Three hundred and twenty-nine men of this one regiment were killed, wounded, captured or missing. Colonel Wallace closes his report:

"In order to a due appreciation of the courage, endurance, and fortitude of the men by whom this victory has been won, it must be borne in mind that they marched from Fort Henry without transportation or tents or rations except what they carried; that they were exposed for three days and nights without tents and almost without fires—being so near the enemy's lines as to render fires imprudent; that the weather was extremely severe; two nights they were thus exposed being accompanied with driving snow-storms and severe cold; that during the whole three days they were under fire, and were compelled to bivouac in line of battle with their arms in their hands; added to this, most of them had never seen a battle, and but few had ever heard a hostile shot."

Those were the times that tried men's souls, and transformed boys into men.

The letter from which I have quoted is among General Grant's official reports of the capture of Fort Donelson, and is dated February 17, 1862. Mr. Sweney had been lying all the previous night in the storm, crawling over the snow, towards morning, until in his exhausted condition he must have thought he had come to the end, when the deeper shadows would close about him.

While in this helpless condition, suffering from pain, exhausted by loss of blood, half dead from weakness, some miscreant came up to him and pulled off his boots, robbing him as if he were really dead, leaving him that much more exposed to the cold. He afterwards told of his feelings with respect to the indignity of this act, when he was treated as

a dead man, not to mention the additional wrench to his wounded leg. But he proved a very lively dead man; with his indomitable will and youthful strength, he managed to outlive the night and its barbarities. A little later he was roused by the sound of some one walking through the underbrush. He ordered the man to halt, insisted on being helped to shelter, and was thus rescued the day after he had been wounded. The surgeons were for amputation, but with his characteristic firmness he insisted that it should not be done, and his way prevailed. In the course of the following months he recovered sufficiently to be discharged with a permanent disability. Even then he was not willing to become an idler, and was put in charge of a vessel that was doing transport service on one of the western rivers.

Mr. Sweney was that type of man who is bound to be successful, because he did what his hand found to do with all his might. Those about him recognized this. When the former captain of his company came to Washington as a member of Congress he secured a position for his former sergeant in the Post Office Department. Here he gradually rose from one grade to another. When I first became acquainted with him several years later, he was Chief Clerk in the office of the Second Assistant Postmaster General, where he was a most careful and competent servant of the Government.

The great railway and star-route lines, with thousands of miles of mail service, involving the expenditure of millions of dollars annually, are all handled in this office. The ability and conscientious work of Mr. Sweney were recognized by all his associates, some of whom are here with us to night to bear witness to the fact.

In later years he gave the same devotion and industry to the Secretaryship of the American Surety Company of New York, in whose service he continued until his death.

Standing by his desk, one day last week, I was told by his successor: "The more I see of the work which Mr. Sweney did the more I wonder at the amount and manner of it." He was an all-around man; strong in his attachments; devoted as a friend; faithful in his business; loyal to every interest he espoused; tireless in application; gentle as a woman in his disposition, yet strong as a lion in his detestation of any wrong or meanness. He was truly a rare spirit, whose going away has made a large gap in every circle in which he moved. The President of the United States has recently said that in this world the one thing supremely worth having is the opportunity, coupled with the capacity, to do well and worthily a piece of work the doing of which is of vital consequence to the welfare of mankind.

That principle holds true in every sphere of life,

and in every grade of work. No one could better have illustrated that principle in private life than Mr. Sweney. He put himself into what he did, with a combination of capacity and conscience more than ordinary.

There is one beautiful incident in the life of our friend whom we honor to-night to which I feel like referring, since it furnishes one clue to the gentleness and faithfulness of the man.

When he was yet a lad his mother gave him a Bible, with her prayer that he would keep it and read it. That Bible never was out of his keeping. Each day he read it, and somewhere, once in the twenty-four hours, he remembered his mother and her God. Can we doubt that the same faith was deep down in his heart, uttered or unexpressed?

There is many a mother who has done the same for her boy, but unfortunately not every boy has done the same for his mother. What a power there is in a religious sentiment to influence life, and mould the conduct! A Bible which has come from a mother's hand is a daily sermon, and in this one case we know the mother's hand was on her boy to the last day of his life. His heart was made sympathetic, and his life gentle.

How his soul burned at the sight of any wrong!

Once on the streets of our city he came across an old colored woman who was being tormented

by a crowd of ruffians. Instantly he charged the group with his heavy cane and put them to flight. He would not have hesitated to attack an army alone, if he knew he was in the right.

He was tender with suffering, and fond of the children, who were drawn to him as if instinctively recognizing the childlike in him. I remember one summer on the coast of Maine, where we had spent our vacation together, the children grew so fond of him that when the time came for him to go they clung to him on the wharf, and cried as the steamer sailed away. There were great tears, also, in the eyes of their friend, who was as transparent as a child in all his ways.

Suddenly, in the extreme heat of the past summer, the deeper shadows fell, the last battle was soon fought, and he was alone again, in the night, as on the field at Fort Donelson. Before his three-score years had been filled up, while still in the midst of usefulness, life's fitful fever ended, and he fell asleep, on the 6th July, 1901.

Yesterday we laid in the ground all that was mortal of our friend.

We sounded the "taps," for the lights were out.

The shadows of the prison-house closed entirely around him so far as earth is concerned.

Now let me apply these words of the Saviour. Is it not plain how they fit? They fit our friend.

A cup of cold water to a thirsty disciple—why, yes, he was always waiting to do just that. He was not against us, then by Christ's own line of argument he must be on our part. Once, as we walked away from this house, after a sermon on the Christian doctrine of immortality, he set out with much force his own ideas on the subject.

In his heart he was a believer. We have so much of the harsher side of Bible teaching on which we lay emphasis, often to the discouragement of those who want to believe. Let us lay the emphasis tonight on these gentler words of the Master.

He speaks as if he wanted to include every man, unless that were made impossible by perverse opposition. If he is not against us, the Saviour said, he must be on our side. Let us claim him. If he will not do more than give one of you a cup of cold water, you may judge from that act where his heart is. I assure you he shall not lose his reward.

Does it not bring some light to us in respect to many a life that might be unable to measure up to any other standard? We are liable to make other arbitrary tests. We set up a doctrinal test; a money test; a church membership test; and create the impression that we can thus decide between the lost and the saved—between Christ's disciple and the enemy of Christ. We do well to remember that the Saviour has his own tests.

Here are two of them set down so plainly that we cannot misread them. If you are not against Him you must be on the other side. If you have ever done any service, even the smallest, done in the right spirit, done in the name of Christ, it shall not go unrewarded. There is nothing harsh or narrow about that. Yet it is the very word of Jesus Christ, enforced by His own illustration.

And we cannot help believing that He selected the simplest, most common act of every-day life in that illustration, so that it might not escape any living soul in its application save only the wilfully perverse, the persistently hostile, who were at heart against Christ.

Comrades of the Grand Army, you are here this evening to do honor to as noble and brave a comrade as ever wore the blue.

The men of the mould of George Sweney are all too rare in this world. When they go away life is not the same afterwards to their companions. The earth is richer for their having been on it, but now the poorer that their places are vacant.

We must all march to the same music, fight the same battle, and answer to the same final roll-call.

It is a great thing to do one's duty in any place; and the greatest thing of all is to do one's duty to God and one's fellowmen. "That shall give a man

peace at the last." We are all looking in that direction.

Somehow we are all wanting to bring up at the gate of our Father's house in the end.

Our friend did, I know, for he often talked of these matters in his serious hours, and thought of them often when he did not talk of them. He never wanted to get far away from the influence of that mother's Bible.

What a great thing we hold out for the hope of men in our Christian faith! It is the immortal life; the expectation of coming together as children are expecting to meet in the coming Thanksgiving time at the old home.

So Christ said: "In my Father's house are many mansions."

> "There what one thinks is his to grasp;
> There are no dreams, but very joys to reap;
> No foiled desires that die before delight,
> No fears to see across our joys and weep."
>
> —Swinburne.

Here now we must take leave of our friend, our comrade, and brother.

There is a great wrench when a life so loyal and true is ended.

Neither his devoted wife nor any of his own family could be present at this service to-night, but

their hearts are with us, and we can feel what the bitterness of the loss of such a brother, husband and friend must be.

Yet there stands before us our Father's house, at the bound of life where we lay our burdens down.

Dr. Babcock, whose life closed so tragically last summer, wrote a few lines not long before, which seemed prophetic for himself, and might apply always as we stand in the presence of death.

Why be afraid of death as though your life were breath?
Death but anoints your eyes with clay. O glad surprise!

Why should you be forlorn? Death only husks the corn.
Why should you fear to meet the thrasher of the wheat?

Is sleep a thing to dread? Yet sleeping you are dead
Till you awake and rise, here or beyond the skies.

Why should it be a wrench to leave your wooden bench?
Why not with happy shout run home when school is out?

The dear ones left behind! O foolish one and blind,
A day and you will meet—a night and you will greet!

This is the death of death, to breathe away a breath
And know the end of strife and taste the deathless life,

And joy without a fear and smile without a tear,
And work, nor care to rest, and find the last the best.

So our friend came to his emancipation.

He passed from the "shades of the prison house" of earth to the sunlight of our Father's house above.

Washington, D. C.
Church of the Reformation.
*November* 24, 1901.

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